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ABSTRACT

The Behavioral Coaches (BC) is a comprehensive program designed to assist those students who demonstrate significant behavioral difficulties in school and are at serious risk of school failure or of dropping out of school. BC provided direct services to middle schools identified by the District as being in need of additional school support for their students. The BC program has behavior coaches who worked directly with the schools and the students to redirect behavior; defuse crisis behavior; mediate conflicts; and teach appropriate social skills. The findings of this study showed a significant decrease in the number of out-of-school suspensions both at the school and student level. Implications for practice and future research are discussed. (Contains 19 references and 3 tables.) (Author/JDM)

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Serving At-Risk Urban Middle School Students: The Behavioral Coaches Program

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Abstract

The Behavioral Coaches (BC) is a comprehensive program designed to assist those students who demonstrate significant behavioral difficulties in school and are at serious risk of school failure and/or dropping out of school. BC provided direct services to middle schools identified by the District as being in need of additional school support for their students. The BC program has behavior coaches who worked directly with the schools and the students to redirect behavior, defuse crisis behavior, mediate conflicts, and teach appropriate social skills. The findings of this study showed a significant decrease in the number of out-of-school suspensions both at the school and student level. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Discipline, Middle School, Conflict Resolution, Social Skills, At-risk Students

Behavioral Coaches Program

Executive Summary

Background Information

- The program involves six behavioral coaches/mediators in six middle schools with the specific mission of working with 30 students per school to facilitate the adjustment of students to the expectations in their classroom/school.
- The program is specifically designed for students who repeatedly engage in disruptive behavior.
- The number of students that will be served by the program is approximately 180 students each year.
- The program will result in diverting the need for out-of-school suspensions.

Program Objectives

1. The program will serve middle school students who are disruptive and who engage in severe or frequent emotional outbursts/aggression.
2. The program will offer a range of high-quality services to modify students' misbehavior, allowing them to adapt successfully to the classroom/school environment.
3. Participants in the program will exhibit both positive behavioral changes and positive academic changes.

Research Questions

1. Is the program serving middle school students who repeatedly engage in disruptive behavior?
2. Are student participants showing improvement on non-cognitive measures such as suspensions?

Analysis and Reporting Procedures

- Units of analysis are students participating in the Behavioral Coaches/Mediator Program during the 2001-2002 school year.
- Data sources will include (a) non-cognitive and (b) cognitive student data.
- Multiple stakeholders will be surveyed and project staff will complete activity logs.
- Statistical analysis will include descriptive and inferential statistics.
- Critical program findings will be disseminated on a semester and annual basis to key stakeholders.

Evaluation Results

- The program is targeting the needy schools and working with the most suspended students within the participating schools.

- When compared to the baseline school year (i.e., first three pupil months), the current school year data exhibits an average of 16.5 % decrease in the total number of suspensions for the participating schools.
    - Kammerer shows a 37% decrease in the total number of suspensions
    - Knight shows a 17% increase in the total number of suspensions
    - Meyzeek shows a 25% decrease in the total number of suspensions
    - Noe shows a 23% decrease in the total number of suspensions
    - Southern shows a 23% decrease in the total number of suspensions
    - Thomas Jefferson shows a 5% decrease in the total number of suspensions

- Similarly, when student level data for the current year is compared with that of the previous year in the same pupil months, participating students experienced an overall decrease of 21% in the number of suspensions as a direct result of the program.
    - Kammerer students show a 46% decrease in the number of suspensions
    - Knight students show a 33% increase in the total number of suspensions
    - Meyzeek students show a 52% decrease in the total number of suspensions
    - Noe students show a 33% increase in the total number of suspensions
    - Southern show a 68% decrease in the total number of suspensions
    - Thomas Jefferson students show a 25% decrease in the total number of suspensions

- If outlier data analysis is performed, thus excluding Knight Middle School, the percentage points decrease in total number of suspensions at the school and student levels changes to 19% and 32%, respectively.

Evaluation Recommendations

- Continue the process of convergence and integration of school-wide intervention strategies with individual student behavioral prevention strategies.
- Continue the *formative evaluation* process by means of assessing progress toward objectives on a per pupil month or on a six week basis is recommended.
- Continue the *summative evaluation* process by means of exploring the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of this program. An end-of-year study will assess the impact of the program in both non-cognitive and cognitive measures at the school- and student-level.

Behavioral Coaches Program

Introduction

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) is the 26th largest school district in the United States. The school district serves more than 96,000 students from preschool to grade 12. The JCPS vision for long-term student achievement, entitled "Beyond 2000", was designed to assure that every student would acquire the fundamental academic and life skills necessary for success in the classroom and workplace. The JCPS vision commits the school system to educate each student to the highest academic standards while ensuring attention to non-cognitive measures such as attendance and discipline.

Violence prevention at the middle school is not a new subject in the educational arena (Adami & Norton, 1996; Buckner & Flanary, 1996; Burke & Herbert, 1996; Furlong, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Rich, 1992; Sheets, 1996). The literature review shows that much stronger research is needed to assess the impact of behavior related programs. Process information is important, but outcome or impact analyses are more than important.

JCPS is a school district that values both the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of student achievement. In response to the needs on the non-cognitive dimension at the middle school level, the school district officials have established the Behavior Coaches (BC) Program since the school year 2000-2001.

BC is a comprehensive program designed to assist those students who demonstrate significant behavioral difficulties in school and are at serious risk of school failure and/or dropping out of school. BC provided direct services to middle schools identified by the District as being in need of additional school support for their students.

The BC program has behavior coaches who worked directly with the schools and the students to redirect behavior, defuse crisis behavior, mediate conflicts, and teach appropriate social skills. In general, the objective is to promote a higher level of positive behavior on the part of the students involved in the program within the school. The middle school BC program consists of six behavior coach/mediators that work with 20-30 students each. The total number of middle school students receiving services from the BC/M is between 120-180 students per semester.

All behavioral coaches/mediators were trained in case management, community services, effective behavior management, behavior modification, crisis prevention intervention, and safe physical management. In addition, the schools participating in the BC program were required to accommodate the behavioral coach and to take part in a two-day behavioral institute titled "Building a Positive School Culture: Reaching the Challenging Student."

The Value of Early Intervention

Past research indicates a relationship between early school experiences and subsequent dropping out of high school. Kaplan, Peck and Kaplan report observing a relationship between seventh-grade academic failure and later dropout behavior (Kaplan, et al., 1997), while Lloyd finds that dropping out of school can be linked to early non-academic measures such as absences during the sixth-grade (Lloyd, 1974). Students that are able to decrease such risk factors early on will therefore be less likely to drop out in later years.

The link between student behavior and academic success has also been the subject of research. Finn notes that students that are consistent in exhibiting 'noncompliant'

behaviors such as disruptive classroom behavior will experience difficulties in learning (Finn, 1993). Programs such as BC attempt to address behavioral issues in the early years of education, with hopes of reducing factors that might put a student at risk for subsequent dropping out of high school.

Program Activities

The expectations of the behavioral coaches/mediators in this program include:

- Deescalating situations using techniques such as proximity control, eye contact, signaling, private conferencing, praise, supportive statements, writing positive notes, and encouraging students to praise themselves.
- Contacting parents regarding responsible behavior, occasionally rewarding individuals in tangible ways.
- Removal from audience.
- Contingency management.
- Helping students to reflect upon behavioral patterns to self determine if student could have handled the problem and reacted to conflict differently.
- Teaching students how to be assertive without being aggressive and how to use different verbal and behavioral responses to conflict.
- Assisting students in understanding various ways that others may use in order to initiate a conflict.
- Role-playing techniques.
- Doing behavioral rehearsals.
- Monitoring academics to determine if behavioral patterns are associated with academic frustrations.

- Making sure students understand what the behavioral expectations are.
- Arranging the physical space so that it is more conducive to responsible behavior than irresponsible behavior.
- Assisting in running efficient transitions between activities.

The behavioral coaches/mediators assist in ensuring that students do not experience negative results from exhibiting responsible behavior. Specific actions include, for example, that no student is laughed at for making a mistake during class participation. The behavioral coaches/mediators are able to evaluate student misbehavior and modify any conditions that may be perpetuating the misbehavior. Examples include providing lessons to teach the students how to behave responsibly and assigning different seats to students who talk when they sit together. In this sense, the behavioral coaches/mediators may need to remove any aversive aspects of exhibiting responsible behavior while removing any positive aspects of exhibiting irresponsible behavior.

In-services, training, and monitoring are provided by Students Relations and Safety or staff designated by the Program Directors. On-going meetings either weekly or semi-monthly are held with Behavioral Coaches to determine various needs and/or further training.

The program's shool selection process involved multiple steps. The first step was to identify the middle schools with the highest suspension rates in the District. Applications were sent to twelve middle schools. Of these twelve, six middle schools met the aforementioned characteristic and were accepted for participation in the Behavioral Coaches program: Kammerer, Knight, Meyzeek, Noe, Southern, and Thomas

Jefferson. These schools were applicants who met the program criteria and demonstrated a willingness to accommodate the program.

Evaluation Objectives and Questions

The evaluation objectives were to conduct an outcome evaluation of the program to assess its impact of the on participants. Attention was focused on methods to document the evolution of the program from its inception through completion. The overarching evaluation questions that guided the study were distributed in two different areas, namely (a) student profile or socio-demographic characteristics and (b) outcome evaluation related to cognitive and non-cognitive measures.

Students' Socio-Demographic Characteristics:

- What are the characteristics and number of the students participating in the program?

Outcome Evaluation Measures:

- Are there differences in participating students in academic measures?
- Are there differences in participating students in non-academic measures?

Evaluation Model

The Management-Oriented Evaluation Approach

According to Stufflebeam (1983), evaluation is a process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives. The Context, input, Process, and Product (CIPP) Evaluation has different objectives, methods, and relation to decision making in the change process depending on the type of evaluation emphasis. The JCPS education leaders have to satisfy their informational needs to make decisions.

> The management-oriented rationale is that the evaluative information is an essential part of good decision-making and that the evaluator can be most effective by serving administrators, policy makers, boards, practitioners, and others who need good evaluative information (Worthen et al., 1997, p. 97).

Alkin (1991) stated that evaluation is a process of gathering information, the information collected in an evaluation used mainly to make decisions about alternative courses of action, with different kinds of decisions requiring different kinds of evaluation procedures. The Outcome evaluation model of Klein, Fenstermacher, and Alkin (1971) will be utilized in the Behavioral Coaches program design, analysis, and reporting to provide information that might be later used to make improvement decisions regarding the program.

Method

Participants

The average caseload for each Behavioral Coach was about 30 students. Approximately 54% of the students were living with a single parent. From a socio-economic perspective, 86% of the students were on free or reduced lunch. In terms of race or ethnicity, 64% of the students were Black while 31% were White. A total of 59% of the students were Male (See Table 1).

Analyzing the participants from an academic perspective, these students can be categorized as at-promise (at-risk in the old terminology). The average mean scores on the Stanford Diagnostic Reading and Mathematics Tests were 2.72 and 2.40, respectively. Any student scoring in the first three (3) stanines on standardized tests such as the Stanford Diagnostic Reading and Mathematics Test is considered susceptible to academic failure.

In summary, it is observed that the participating students were students facing barriers to learning in multiple ways, including a socioeconomic background at the poverty level. According to previous research in the district under examination, there is a strong relationship between student socio-economic status as measured by free/reduced lunch participation and student achievement (Munoz & Dossett, 2001). If we add to these equations that most participating students were living in single-parent homes and experiencing problems in both academic and behavioral areas early on in their educational careers, the level of opposition to their individual successes is further confirmed.

Table 1

Profile of the Middle School Students Participating in the Program (N = 178)

School	Students	Single-parent	Race	Gender	Fr/Red Lunch
Kammerer	30	***	27 Black 3 White	14 Male 16 Female	83%
Knight	28	15 (54%)	9 Black 17 White 2 Other	20 Male 8 Female	82%
Meyzeek	30	23 (77%)	21 Black 7 White 2 Other	17 Male 13 Female	97%
Noe	30	27 (90%)	21 Black 7 White 2 Other	17 Male 13 Female	97%
Southern	30	15 (50%)	20 Black 7 White 3 Other	19 Male 11 Female	90%
T. Jefferson	30	17 (57%)	16 Black 14 White	18 Male 12 Female	67%
Total	178	97 (54%)	B 64% W 31% O 5%	M 59% F 41%	86%

*** Missing values

Data Collection

The data collected included academic and non-academic measures. Academic measures consisted of students' math and language arts grades, as well as reading and math scores on standardized tests. Non-academic measures included attendance and discipline data (i.e. referrals to the office, in-school and out-of-school suspensions), along with student and teacher ratings on a behavior checklist. The information was collected at the beginning, during, and at the end of the program implementation.

The project coordinator and the evaluator used different data sources to obtain the information. First, the computerized database of the District provided individual student data, including identification number, race, gender, testing scores, attendance, and behavioral related measurements. Second, a program activity log was kept to have all the services documented. Finally, the project coordinator collected "success stories" to share with the school staff and parents.

Data Analysis

The project coordinator worked with the program evaluator to collect, analyze, and disseminate the information on program operations and outcomes. The evaluation design was pre- and post-measurement using reflexive controls (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999). The data analysis included descriptive statistics (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) and dependent-sample t-test (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1994). The dependent-sample t-test wwas used with the purpose of assessing statistically significant differences in different non-cognitive indicators such as absences, referrals, in-school suspensions, and suspensions.

Results

Research Question

- Are there differences in participating students in non-academic measures?

The objectives of the program are clearly oriented toward non-academic areas, specifically behavior-oriented measures.

To assess the impact of the program on the overall number of suspensions within a participating school, a comparison was made between the number of suspensions after the first three pupil months of the preceding year with those of the current year. As depicted in Table 2, all participating schools, with the exception of Knight Middle, have decreased their number of suspensions since the implementation of the BC program by a total of 107, or 16.5%.

Table 2

Comparison of Suspension Data for 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 School Years

School	#Suspensions 2000-2001	#Suspensions 2001-2002
Thomas Jefferson	115	109
Kammerer	59	37
Knight	76	91
Meyzeek	112	84
Noe	129	99
Southern	161	125
Total	652	545

*** Missing Data

In addition, as a means of understanding student level changes as a result of program participation, Table 3 presents the cumulative number of suspensions for student participants during the current school year as compared with the total number of suspensions for students at the same time during the previous school year. Though only three participating schools show a significant decrease since last year, the program participants have experienced an overall decrease in suspensions at the student level of about 9%.

Table 3

Comparison of Student-Level Suspension Data for 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 School Years

School	# Student Suspensions 2000-2001	#Student Suspensions 2001-2002
Thomas Jefferson	28	21
Kammerer	13	14
Knight	19	31
Meyzeek	21	10
Noe	16	24
Southern	25	11
Total	122	111

Discussion

The BC program employs behavior coaches who work directly with the schools and the students to redirect behavior, defuse crisis behavior, mediate conflicts, and teach appropriate social skills. In general, the objective is to promote a higher level of positive behavior on the part of the students involved in the program within the school. The middle school BC program consists of six behavior coach/mediators that work with about 30 students each. The total number of middle school students receiving services this year from the BC program was approximately 180 students per semester.

The participating students were students facing barriers to learning in multiple ways, the most prominent being the poverty level. According to previous research in the district under examination, there is a strong relationship between student socio-economic status as measured by free/reduced lunch participation and student achievement (Munoz & Dossett, 2001). If we add to the equation that most of these students were living in single-parent homes and scored in the first three stanines on standardized tests, that further confirms the levels of opposition faced by them in being successful in school and life. Students with behavior problems often drop out of school and put themselves in a long-term disadvantage in becoming productive citizens.

The objectives of the program are clearly oriented toward non-academic areas, specifically behavior-oriented measures. In terms of suspensions, since the implementation of the Behavioral Coaches program, participants have experienced an overall decrease in the number of suspensions at both the school and student levels. To meet the needs of particular schools that did not show marked decreases in their

suspension numbers, extra efforts will be made to identify students with the highest individual number of suspensions and to offer them additional intervention strategies.

Limitations and Future Research Implications

The main limitation of this research is the lack of control schools and students. Threats to internal validity include maturation, regression toward the mean, and selection bias. The academic-related findings have to be interpreted with precaution since this is not a truly cognitive intervention. In addition, the academic outcomes might be related to cognitive-related programs in place at the participating schools. The non-academic results might also be influenced by other truancy and behavior-related interventions running at the participating schools.

Future research needs to address the aforementioned limitations by using comparison group if deemed possible by the program specialists. A control group might prove useful to address the threats to internal validity. Additionally, more process-oriented data, including qualitative methods such as observation and interview techniques might help to understand the dynamics of this program.

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